Mark Owens (MO)

Mark Owens is a Philadelphia-based graphic designer, writer, and educator. As a part of his design practice, Owens often writes about the intersection of design, music, and material culture in publications like *PIN-UP*, *IDEA*, *GRAPHIC*, and *Dot Dot Dot*. While his writing touches on subjects from Brutalism to Times New Roman, his specific relationship to punk and hardcore subcultures has given him a unique perspective on the recent bootleg phenomenon. In his teaching, Owens conducts a workshop on hauntology, the concept of elements from a non-existent past reappearing in the present like a ghost. While there is often an archival element to bootlegging, under the guise of hauntology, they have a far greater potential to fill an invented gap between history and fantasy. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: As someone with such a deep interest in obscure music subcultures, I'd love to hear what bootlegs mean to you. In these communities, what value do bootlegs hold?

MO: For me, the most generative way to distinguish bootlegging from practices like knockoffs or pirating

is to emphasize the connection to music, fandom, and modes of circulation. In this respect, bootlegs as we know them are an invention of the late 1960s and describe "unauthorized" recordings such as audience tapes, demos, and studio outtakes that are circulated on vinyl by fans without the permission of the artist or major label. The presumption is that the true fan already has all of the "legitimate" releases by a given artist, and the bootleg is filling a gap that the music industry is either unwilling or unable to fill. The bootleg thus has both an archival value and also provides insight into the artist's creative process that an "official" release that is sanitized and over-dubbed might not. By pressing vinyl records of these recordings and inserting them into the marketplace, bootleggers were also occupying systems of production and distribution. This combination of archival value, fandom, and (mis)use of systems of circulation also opens up an enormous space for creativity in the form of label names, cover artwork, material choices (like colored vinyl), and the sourcing, sequencing, and editing of bootleg material—this is where things like mash-ups find a close proximity to bootlegs.

It is this creative dimension that the current crop of bootleg projects inherit from the earlier bootleg era and transport into the internet-savvy present—whether in music or some other medium. As designers, we are very often working as our own editors, archivists, and researchers, so I think for my own practice this creative potential within the bootleg impulse is one that can help inform design decisions and suggest new possibilities—even if they might be "irresponsible" or "vulgar" ones.

BS: Are there any projects of yours that come to mind where bootlegging played a significant role?

MO: A few years ago my partner, Alex Klein, and I were invited to contribute to a group exhibition at LAXART in Los Angeles loosely organized around the idea of the bootleg. We had always wanted to make a piece of furniture and were fans of the *Ulm Stool*, which was originally created by Max Bill in 1954 for the Ulm School and is still sold by Vitra as an icon of modernist design— a simple form that can double as a portable stool or a bookshelf. At the time, we had also managed to track down some deadstock Memphis Bacterio pattern laminate from a vendor in Studio City, and we wondered what it would be like to cover the outside of Max Bill's Ulm Stool with this pattern designed by Ettore Sottsass, the quintessential postmodern designer, who we were also huge fans of. So, we made one, imagining this bootleg stool as a kind of "lost" collaboration between the two designers. Ironically, the laminate gave the stool, which is normally raw wood, both an added decorative element and an improved functionality.

In terms of client work, a similar idea informed a pair of catalogs I created in collaboration with the artist and curator Justin Beal along with designer Nilas Andersen. These catalogs document two group shows, "Soft Matter" and "Touchpiece," which included design objects and artworks that, very generally, explore connections between materials and the body. Many of the works feature flexible "skins" of various kinds, and we wanted to find a way to get that idea into the book. Justin had suggested revisiting a catalog designed by Andrea Branzi's studio

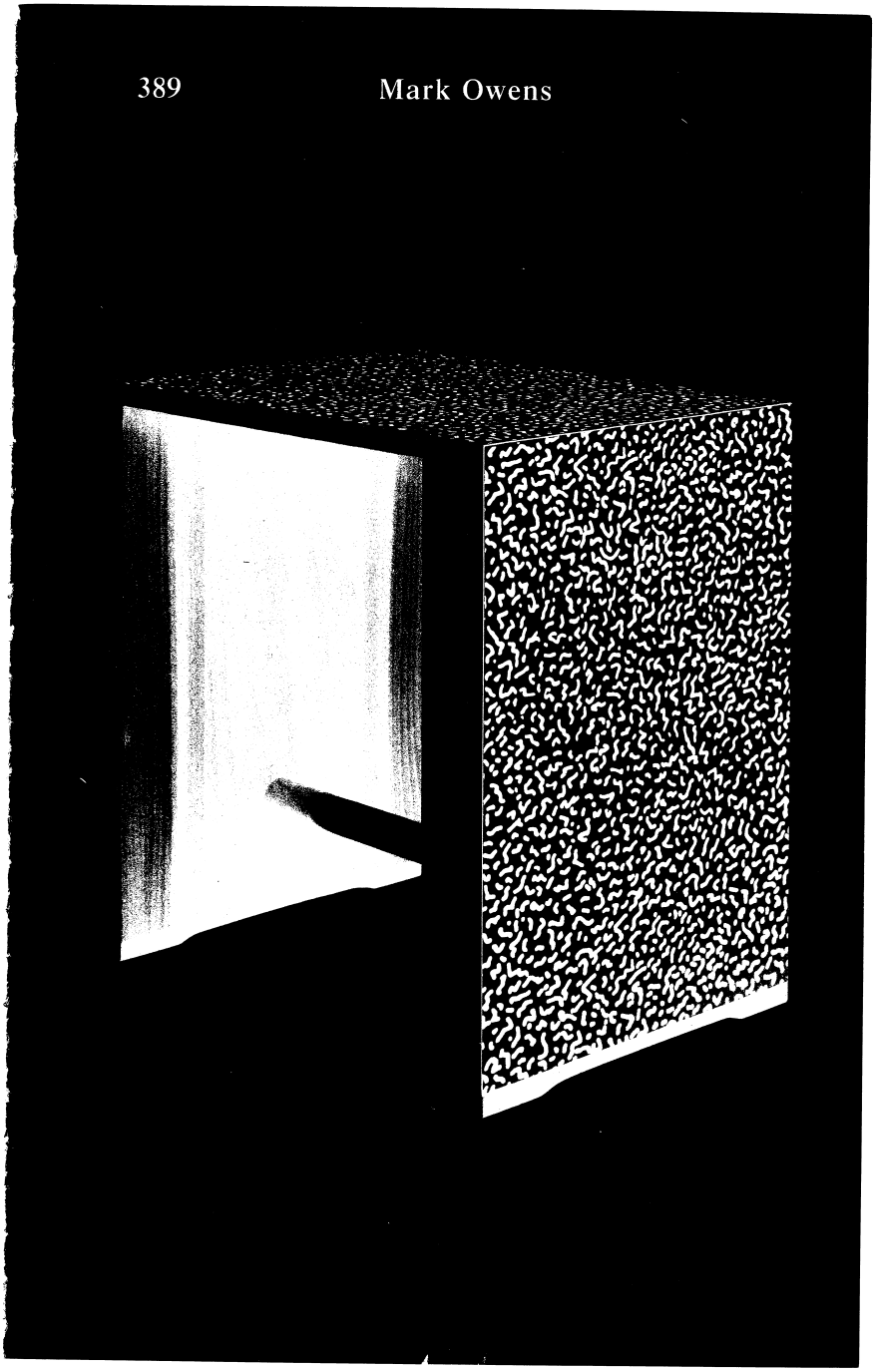
in 1986, *Domestic Animals*. The book is long out of print and somewhat marginal to Branzi's output as an industrial designer, but we tracked it down and attempted to "pour" our contents into its format. Of course, in the process all kinds of unexpected things happened, and we ended up making design decisions that we never would have on our own. The paperback is also a format that is scaled to the size of the human hand and is part of a whole economy of circulation, so we ended up with two books that function as additions to an imagined series and enter into dialogue with their predecessors. The artist Martin Kippenberger did something similar with his *Peter* catalogs (1987), whose format was based on a Sonnabend Piero Manzoni catalog (1973), and his example was also very much on our minds.

> BS: In your writing and teaching practice you've examined the idea of hauntology, which feels related to bootlegging in their mutual desire to exhume the past. Do you consider bootlegging a hauntological act?

MO: Jacques Derrida coined the term hauntology in a very specific context, and his basic insight is that media "spectralizes." When you mediate something, when you put an image of yourself on television or in a broadcast, you're spectralizing—there's a "there" and also a "not there." For me, that's the main thrust of the Derrida quote and is something I was thinking a lot about with my Paul McCartney text ('R.I.P.: Notes on the Paul McCartney Shadow Canon') in *Dot Dot Dot*. There is Hauntology as a style catego-

p. 389: Mark Owens, Alex Klein, Bootleg Ulm stool (2011)

389 Mark Owens



ry, which is related to this idea of plunderphonics and involves taking the textures of the past and creating a past that never really existed. There's a fiction-making element, it's conjuring a shared set of ideas about a time period and creating a new version of that period in the present. There's something creative about it which is related to bootlegging.

> BS: I wonder how this creative element might relate to the bootleg's archival potential? Is there some value in presenting a history that might deviate from the more commonly accepted narrative?

MO: When I think about a project like Boot Boyz Biz, it's less hauntological and more of an archival project. It's taking things that really did exist and mashing together the graphic forms. Perhaps they begin to relate to hauntology in the way they can occupy a sort of imaginative space that at times can be more interesting than a simple recount of historical details.

I think the archival dimension and a sense of desire or fandom is an important part of bootlegging. Studio outtakes, audience tapes, and demos are all the products of a kind of audio archaeology. They take research and digging, and often bootleggers will put these elements together to tell a story, to fill in a gap in the "official" record, or to create an imagined artifact. I think this aspect distinguishes bootlegs from straightforward ripoffs, clones, or copies.

Growing up listening to punk bands at a time when many of the original groups had long since broken up, I encountered the records themselves as historical artifacts and studied the minutiae of type, layout, photography, lyrics, and liner notes with the kind of

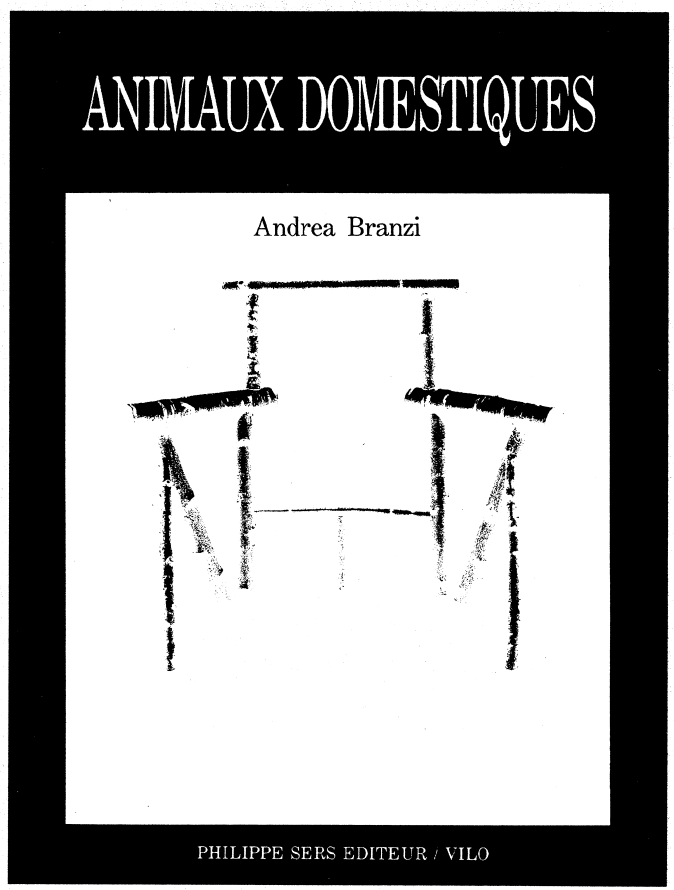
attention that designers are very familiar with. Bootlegs open up and mine this imaginative space as well.

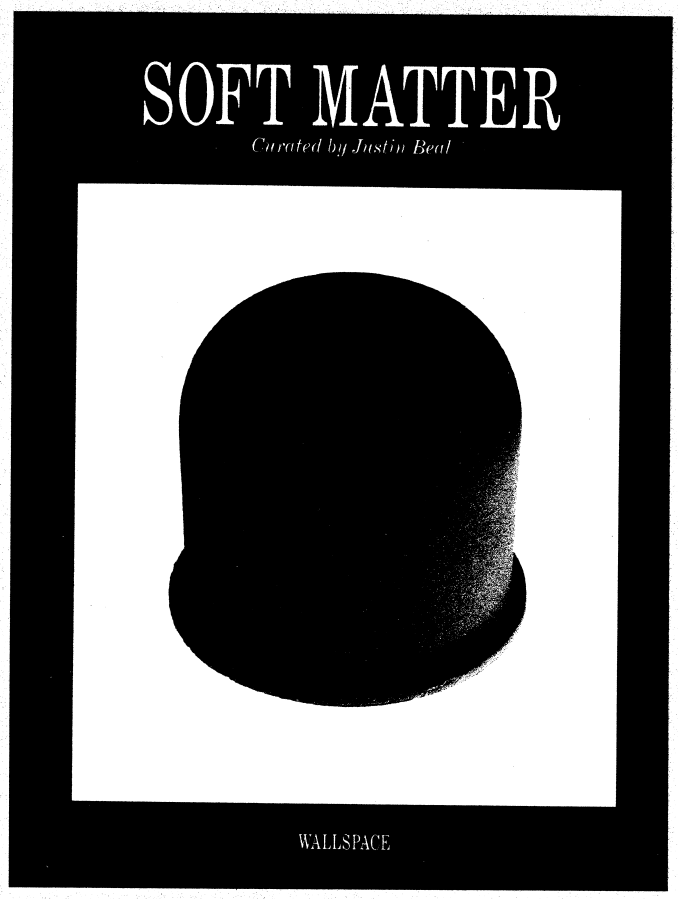
I agree with the fact that a bootleg might allow us to understand something better than an original. People who can say "I was there" are generally not the best people to understand what's actually going on with some perspective. When you are witnessing something as it's happening, you can't have a clear and informed vantage point until time has passed. A good example of this is minimal wave, which wasn't a genre in 1980. No one was making "minimal wave music." There were people in the States and in Belgium and scattered over Europe that were all making this particular style of music and tape trading, but they were just doing it and not thinking about what it was. The idea of minimal wave is a later formulation of trying to make sense of what was happening at that particular time. There's the continuum of history that's flowing by and things are happening and someone in the present takes that moment, names it, and finds new extensions.

> BS: To me, at least in design, it feels like the bootleg trend has reached a sort of culmination. At one point during this research I was fairly convinced that it would be impossible for bootlegging to move forward in any sort of meaningful way. Is bootlegging dead?

MO: What's happening with bootlegging feels very similar to the vaporwave phenomenon in the sense that it's a genre of music that people have been saying

p. 392: Andrea Branzi, *Animaux Domestiques* (1988)
p. 393: Justin Beal, *Soft Matter* (2014)


ANIMAUX DOMESTIQUES
Andrea Branzi
PHILIPPE SERS EDITEUR / VILO


SOFT MATTER
Curated by Justin Beal
WALLSPACE

is exhausted since it began in 2012. Every year people claim it is played out and every year someone finds something new and interesting in the genre. It's an interesting phenomenon where it's constantly renewing itself in ways that still feel fresh. People are able to curate a suite of things that they're so deep in and constantly pull out something new. I think that's true of any historical investigation, people right now are looking at the 1920s or 1930s or Ben Franklin's archive and still finding something new and a new way to relate it to the present. I'm reminded of a term from Walter Benjamin, "Jetztzeit" which involves pulling something from the past into the present as a way of understanding its radical potential, and to me that speaks to the power of bootlegs.

I recently saw an Instagram account that only makes Steely Dan bootlegs. I would listen to Steely Dan in college, and it's always been sort of uncool, but then these bootlegs frame them in a super creative and funny way that is exciting to me. So I do agree there's a certain bootleg phenomenon happening now, but what makes it exciting is the content and the cleverness. It's this idea we all inherited from postmodernism, that the pushing together of various reference points makes something entirely different. But what makes it different from postmodernism, which is sort of cynical and ironic and heartless, is this idea of fandom. Bootlegs come from economic opportunism on the one hand, and on the other just this love of a fan, which I think is special.

I absolutely believe in a future for bootlegs. At their best, bootlegs and musical forms like plunderphonics and mash-ups create entirely new forms out of pre-existing material. For me, these internet subgenres tap into larger questions of collective memo-

ry, affect, and the material remainder that exceeds the parameters of a given historical moment or even a given material artifact.

Title page (p. 384): Powell Peralta logo taken from Mark Owens' Hauntology class syllabus